

Article 3

'FORMWORK': A CASE STUDY OF A RESEARCH PROCESS

By David Wright (Australia)

Abstract:

Through reflection on an experience of participation in a cross-cultural performance based workshop I argue that such experiences are occasions for research into considerably more than performance styles. Issues of language, culture, learning and research methodology are among those that unfold. On such occasions research can become a physical and emotional experience. This can draw the researcher to examine the relationships that unfold and the senses through which those relationships are known, (as much as any styles and technical skills that may be involved). This brings the perspective from which the researcher views the subject matter sharply into focus.

Just as the research process can take many forms, the way in which the research is known and communicated can also take many forms, the languages of performance and written language forms being only two of those forms. In this article, my reflections on my own experience are central to my study. As I chart my way through my relationship to the workshop process my own learning, and subsequent insights into the learning process, emerge as important legacies. My examination of the process reveals my learning, just like that of the performers who were more obviously physically involved, as based in my body. It suggests that the body, which is so obviously an intrinsic part of performance is also intrinsic to the learning that is taken away from the performance experience.

Author's biography

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Introduction

Some time ago I was invited, as a writer, to participate in a workshop designed to introduce four Sydney-based actors to the training methods and performance styles of Peking Opera. The workshop, titled Formwork, was funded by the Performing Arts Board of the Australia Council and the Australia-China Council following applications from theatre director Sally Sussman.

I was invited to create a written text for the Sydney-based actors to develop into a performance for an invited audience of sponsors, professional colleagues and friends. The text was to arise from my experience of the workshop process, my conversations with the director and my readings on the style.

In retrospect neither the workshop nor the text are the elements of the experience I most value now. The workshop has long since concluded, but Formwork remains in my consciousness as a significant learning experience. I feel I have been changed by the process. The people I met, the ideas I conceived, the further opportunities that I gained as a result of the work are a major part of this change. This is sufficient to suggest that, in the language of Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela (1987), autopoietically, through the experience of Formwork, I have found congruence in new relationships. I have come to participate differently in a world that is, from my perspective, changed.

Maturana and Varela suggest that the imagination that accompanies any experience - let alone any product resulting from participation in any project - is enough to create a change in substance. Using this reasoning, I can reflect upon my experience of Formwork as a physical experience. It was physical even more so because I was an engaged participant. Each day I worked amidst the heat and dust of the rehearsal room and while I was not required to participate in the strict regime of physical training that the actors were taken through, I feel I gained my greatest learning about the style of performance through my experience of the physical experience of the actors, both Chinese and non-Chinese.

The body of learning in Peking Opera

I place emphasis upon the experience of the body in this project because so much of the learning that was encountered during Formwork was physical. The project did not materialise, to any great extent, through research into data, stories or text. The work was initiated and undertaken primarily by active physical bodies. I worked with those active physical bodies. I wrote about them and their inter-relationships as I experienced them unfold. This meant that both the active physical bodies of the performers employed in the project and my relationship to those bodies were the subject matter of my research. It was research into an action-reflection process.

Because Formwork sought to develop familiarity with a highly refined performance tradition, the physical training of the bodies of the performers was a crucial part of the process. Explanations of the performance tradition were largely confined to physical explanations. The knowledge was passed from body to body because bodies were far more articulate, in a performance context, than words. The fact that the Chinese actors and musicians involved in the project spoke very little English ensured, even more so, that physical - and to a large extent traditional Chinese - training methods predominated.

Each day began with 3-4 hours of physical training. This included meditation and visualisation exercises, breathing exercises, a variety of stretches, kicks and ongoing repetitions of movement patterns, in particular the 'cloudhand' sequence. The cloudhand sequence is a rhythmic flowing gesture designed to enhance "eye-hand-step-body harmony" (*shou-yan-shen-fa-bu*). Cloudhand is emblematic of the performance patterns of Peking Opera. It can be expanded to represent movement around the stage, just as it can be reduced to represent the flow of thoughts in the mind of a performer. It is a physical movement that is entered into, a rhythmic flow that has to be performed, before it can be fully appreciated.

In the early stages of the training the performers also learned to recite the Chinese percussion patterns used in Peking Opera while performing movements. This led them further into the exploration of the relationship between movement, gesture, rhythm and sound. Training in *liangshan* - the striking of a pose accented by a precise rhythmic pulse - was also introduced early and considerable work was done to establish a performative rapport between the Australian and the Chinese actors and the Australian actors and the Chinese musicians.

The physical training was structured around repetition. Over the course of the workshop a range of key movements patterns were developed and refined in this way. The movements would be demonstrated, the actors would copy the movements then repeat them and repeat them and repeat them. Further movements and combinations of movements and developments upon movements would then be introduced. Repetition was used, not simply to 'get the movement right', the repetition of physical action is regarded in Peking Opera, according to Sussman, as a way of absorbing information. She claims that there is a deliberate attempt, in this training, not to engage the actor in thought. The actor needs only to 'learn' the action, in order to repeat it. Hence, the principal form of learning is the learning of the body. The body learns, then contains the information that comprises the style and the role and therefore the performance. It is the body that enters most fully into this research. And as the body learns, the body changes as a result of that learning.

The repetition upon repetition of movement is intended to develop the performance of movements beyond the mechanical reproduction that invariably marks earliest attempts. The development of a greater level of skill leads to a deepening of perception into the performance tradition "The training leads you to see what you are looking for", Sussman says. It enables the performer to "reach another level of perception", to discover 'the flow' within the movement and the performance. It is this flow that is sought by the informed student of Peking Opera. The flow is referred to variously, as *qi* or *jin* and actors are required to cultivate *qi* and *jin*. This cultivation extends beyond the rehearsal room and the performance hall into life. It leads to the identification of the performer with the aesthetic tradition that contains the training, and therefore the learning that has been mastered through the training. In attaining a high level of performance skill, the performer honours his teacher or master and the tradition his master serves. (Until recently all Peking Opera performers were male.) In this respect, the tradition of Peking Opera and the physical training methods it employs, are inherently conservative. It constantly refers back to, and honours its feudal origins. Students are drawn to pay homage to their masters just as their masters pay homage to their masters.

Not only do actors absorb the value system that accompanies the form, but admirers and aficionados do likewise. That value system provides a link between the China of the past and the China of the present. It is a touchstone that keeps the present informed by the past. This suggests that the status of Peking Opera in China - and other such conservative learning traditions - can be read as an ongoing commentary upon artistic, social and political developments in China. It suggests also that Peking Opera actors - as embodiments of a noble past - can find themselves unwitting victims of those developments. (The film *Farewell My Concubine* depicts this conflict most graphically.) It also means that attempts to use Peking Opera to provoke change in social and political relations, as important art forms can do, are invariably confronted by the feudal origins of the tradition. This suggests that the learning system through which Peking Opera is constructed is insufficiently flexible, that paradoxically, Peking Opera must become something that is not-Peking Opera if it is to be maintained.

Valuing the learning

In the months that followed Formwork I began to reflect upon the process through which the text for the final presentation was created. I began to consider more deeply the creativity, language and learning - and the interrelationship between these three elements - that had generated and been generated by the process. My curiosity and my experience as a writer triggered this investigation. My curiosity and my experience as an educator and a researcher propelled the investigation further.

Quite by chance, several weeks after the presentation, I came to review the notes I made and the drafts I wrote during the period of the workshop. As I did I began to reflect upon the manner in which changes had occurred between the various drafts. As might be expected, there is a substantial difference between the thoughts I put down when the subject was first broached and the text that the final performances were drawn from. (Without close scrutiny, the former is not recognisable in the latter.) It occurred to me that these changes could be mapped. They could then be characterised as evidence of the learning process that I had undergone during the writing. Each of the drafts could then be seen as representing stages in my learning, as signposts signifying not only my direction but my depth of involvement. Through this study the influences that contributed to those stages could be analysed and reviewed, the learning approached as subject matter and my own experience of learning, in the context of the workshop, talked about.

This resembles the method adopted by psychologist Howard Gruber. Howard Gardner (1982), reports that when Gruber told his mentor, Jean Piaget, of his intention to undertake a study of creativity, "Piaget responded sceptically, though not without sympathy, 'It touches everything.'" (p. 352) Gruber, in his wisdom, spent ten years analysing "the emerging creativity of Charles Darwin". He pored over voluminous records, from the books and formal papers Darwin wrote, to the scattering of notes and questions Darwin left, addressed to himself. Gardner studied Gruber's approach.

As Gruber sees it, the student of creativity must reconstruct the mental life of the creative individual at various points in the development of his work. 'In his (Darwin's) notebooks', Gruber reports, 'ideas tumble over each other in a seemingly chaotic fashion. The underlying order is something to be constructed, not observed.' Accordingly, the theorist of creativity has to identify certain enduring motifs, and produce a series of 'cognitive maps' that capture the thinker's view of his project at various stages of its evolution" (p. 353)

Beginning the writing

While a number of images developed prior to the workshop remained significant well into the process, the substance of the text grew as I became educated in the training methods used by the director. From my starting point as an observer I gradually came to understand the part I was to play. I, like the locally trained performers, was participating in a learning process. My learning arose in relation to their learning. Their learning was physical and imaginal. My learning, drawn from their learning, was physical and imaginal also. I was required to take responsibility for my learning and to represent it in a script written for performance.

The first draft of the text was written before the workshop began, and influenced largely by presuppositions. It was constructed around a central character whom I called, and who called himself, 'the anthropologist'. As Levi-Strauss (1994) suggests, the allegiance of the anthropologist is divided between two communities. One community he observes and documents, the other community observes the documents he creates. Like myself at the early stage of the process, the anthropologist was detached from the community he sought to write about. He observed it from afar with a pretence of knowledge and an abundance of confidence in his authority. *"I am the custodian," he said, "quickly! Their rituals, their secrets, their heartfelt emotions. I must write them down."* *"Your tragedy, your happiness is safe in my hands"* he mumbled to himself as he constructed a hide from which to observe: *"Tarpaulin on the roof, insulated, new steel beams. Furniture with cushions too. Binoculars..."*

The view". While I have called this an extract from a 'first draft', it is in fact an extract from little more than a ragged collection of images and ideas. Reflecting on it now, I find it curious that the character was written speaking in rhyme. This was not a considered strategy. The rhyme arose in the writing. Of greater interest is my construction of parallels between my position in the project and the position from which the Anthropologist casts his view. It is as if the view of the Anthropologist was mine. As if, through the Anthropologist, I was speaking for myself. His was my attitude. For I was then little more than a very distant observer.

The refugee

The second draft was also developed before the workshop began (though I was at that stage involved in much of the planning). In that draft I teased out a rough image of a character that I was developing an increasing interest in. I called the character 'the refugee'. The refugee was a further development of 'the anthropologist'. The anthropologist's confusion around identity and commitment is shared by the refugee. His (I viewed the character at this time as male) emotional involvement in these problems was however, much greater.

Re-reading my notes following the workshop, I began to reflect upon the dilemma of the refugee. The refugee leaves one community by compulsion and finds or seeks, safe refuge in another. The refugee is different to the immigrant, a degree of compulsion separates them. The refugee is a survivor who seeks solace and security while leaving a considerable amount behind, usually a lack of social order and/or a hostile government, but more importantly a network of family and friends, a history of associations, a culture and a language through which that history and that culture has been understood. But there are other refugees. It is not only political upheaval that can give rise to the refugee experience. *"I am the emotional refugee"*, I wrote in a margin, as a note to come back to. *"I have had to leave feelings behind me."* I repeated the line. It stayed in my mind. It reverberated within me.

The refugee knows two ways of living, two contexts within which living can occur, two languages, two ways of interpreting and understanding the processes of life. They are the way of the old and the way of the new. S/he is constantly required to compare and contrast, to negotiate between these two ways of knowing. S/he is required to manage this conflict in the present. S/he translates present events and experiences through a reservoir of past events and experiences. The associations through which the translation occurs are the product of past processes of translation. This process is replete with learning. That learning walks and talks. It imagines the world anew.

As I worked with these ideas, I identified with the refugee. In my own experience I tracked down the signals, I captured the signs, I understood the experience as mine. I imagined it as analogous to my

function - my creative responsibility as 'writer' - in Formwork. I was there to translate events in the new world of the workshop through the old world of my experience. As I pondered this it became clear that the process of translating experience that is entered into by the refugee is the process of anyone who learns. It is the experience of any self-conscious participant in any self-conscious learning process. Only in reflection is it explained.

The image of 'the refugee' was consolidated as I gained a greater appreciation of the histories of each of the Chinese performers. Each were, and still are, refugees. Each have, as a result of perceived and/or actual threats within their homeland, left family members, friends and established careers to make a 'new' home, in a 'new' land, within a 'new' culture. In doing so, they have confronted 'new' knowledge, 'new' authority, 'new' forms of respect and by no means least, 'new' bodies shaped by 'new' learning. These new phenomena continue to challenge the learning that has shaped them; the systems - carefully crafted by decades of training - that they walk with.

Characters

In the next draft characters were delineated numerically. Hence, 'Character One' - who grew out of the image of 'the anthropologist' into that of 'the refugee' - spoke of his experience.

Everyday I see them. Reflections in windows. Just over my shoulder. Disappearing round corners, I see them and I smell them. In the stale afternoon breeze, from a kitchen beyond a high wall, from the block of flats next to the bus stop, from the home units next to the store. I smell them and I feel them. Stepping in my front door. Standing between me and the wall. Looking down at me as I lie on my bed and recall. The war. I am the refugee. Get behind me. Memories. The mattress is moulded to the sagging weight of my body. My wife. I recall.

This character, through various permutations, grew into 'The Crocodile'. By naming the refugee, 'The Crocodile', I began working with a character. This was a major change. As a character, the crocodile entered into a particular learning process drawn from the general learning that the refugee experience entails.

Interestingly, the image of 'The Crocodile' arose at first as a metaphor for the performance style that I saw being developed in the workshop. It was at first, a self conscious reflection upon Peking Opera. Observing practices in the workshop it occurred to me that, like Peking Opera, the crocodile is something that has arrived at an evolutionary standstill. It has reached a degree of specialisation that renders it impervious to demands that it evolve further. It now requires that others adapt to it.

Reminiscent of a brutal past, it teases us with an uncertain future. I saw the crocodile as somewhat similar: an endangered form threatened by an encroaching civilisation. Like Peking Opera, if the crocodile is to survive it must be protected. Hence, the first lines the character I called 'The Crocodile' spoke - broken up in staccato, in conversation with the cymbals and the Chinese hard drum - were: "*I am the crocodile. I am isolated, I am specialised, I am highly skilled.*"

This led to a shared image, employing each of the actors as four parts of a whole in a movement sequence played against the insistent rhythmic sounds of Chinese percussion.

A: I am the crocodile.

B, C, D: I am isolated. I am specialised. I am highly skilled.

A: Look towards the west.

B: Look towards the evening sky.

C: Look towards the day to come.

D: Look towards the night.

A: I am the emotional refugee.

B: I have had to leave emotions behind me.

Continuing the training

Greater assurance with movement emerged as the training continued. As this became apparent, we began to think about the presentation that was to mark the accomplishments of the workshop. Attempts were made to heighten the distinctions between male and female characters. The cloudhand sequence was expanded into a figure 8 movement traversing the length and breadth of the stage and

rapid transformations between male and female characters were introduced. More distinct impressions of the four characters emerged. As I felt my way into this my body, like my imagination, twisted and turned. I had trouble sitting still during workshop sessions. I had trouble sleeping. I had trouble sitting down and writing.

The first character that rose from the swampy confusion occurred to me as an innocent. A character, simple in thought, manner and expression. A character who could, inadvertently, upset the balance contained within the all encompassing bounds of 'The Crocodile', and let chaos loose.

Narratives generally begin when a balance of tensions - which construct unity - are broken. Inevitably, the character who breaks the unity suffers as a result of this action. However, if the character is an innocent, in a simple story like this, that character must emerge from the suffering, wiser. Hence a new form of balance. This is the journey of learning, the process of change, the transformation of an individual, and through that individual, a community. Necessarily, conflict experienced by one within such a system has an impact upon others.

If the innocent was to suffer, he would have to leave home. (The character was originally written as male but was performed by a female actor.) He would have to become an exile of sorts, (a refugee). And if I was to identify the one character who upset the dramatic tension that sustained the long standing relationship between the four participants, I would also have to identify the other characters and the qualities they represented that enabled this balance to be sustained, before providing the impetus for it to be upset.

If there was to be a character who acted unknowingly and asserted little authority - though sustained a certain regard (the 'innocent') - there would have to be a countervailing force. A leader, a person of authority, a person who consciously sought to maintain the relationships that sustained the unity. This would be my second character. Applying the principles of yin and yang, it seemed obvious that what the innocent lacked in confidence, 'The Leader' would have in abundance. The small measure of conscious consideration that the innocent applied to his experience would lie in stark contrast to the conscious calculation of the Leader. Inevitably strength in one would be balanced against weakness in the other.

And the other two characters. It seemed obvious that they too would have to have a complementary association. As much of the workshop revolved around mind-body relationships it seemed appropriate that the third character could be circumscribed as representing mind, and the fourth circumscribed as representing body. Hence, in the sixth draft four delicately balanced but very distinct characters appeared. They were, 'The Crocodile', 'the Leader', 'the Chef' and 'the Philosopher'.

Introducing the characters

While I imagined these characters as initially four parts of a whole - each physically and emotionally connected to the other - I imagined them also as shifting, moving, interacting and being transformed. Accordingly, around this time I scripted a movement sequence in which each individual would begin, subsumed by the group, then emerge, then merge back, then emerge again. I imagined it as an unfolding motion contributing to individuation.

A weaving and interweaving of community.

A: Behind me

B: Heroics.

C: Behind me,

D: Suspense.

A: Behind me,

B: Expectation.

C: Behind me.

D: Endless

A: Bodies

B: Hunched forward

C: In search of...

D: Youth.

In retrospect, it was not characters that were central to my thinking at this time but relationships. Through imagining a set of relationships I was able to arrive at characters and explanations of the understandings that linked or separated them. Therefore it would be shifts in relationships that determined the manner in which the system would change. The visual image I worked with was a biological one. I imagined a three dimensional cell with a cellular 'skin' that, as a result of internal pressure, changed shape, the distortion of one part of the cell inevitably having an effect on other

parts, setting up a dynamic process resulting in further change as the system re-organises itself.

Concluding remarks

While I could go on and detail the development of characters and the story line, as it unfolded, that is not the main point of this paper. In this regard I am reminded of the observation by the Taoist philosopher-sage Chuang Tzu (1964).

The fish trap exists because of the fish; once you've gotten the fish, you can forget the trap.
The rabbit snare exists because of the rabbit; once you've gotten the rabbit, you can forget the snare. Words exist because of meaning; once you've gotten the meaning, you can forget the words (p. 140).

The same could be said of Formwork. The project was significant for the insight it generated. It convinced the director that she needed to re-consider her artistic goals, it assisted several of the actors (both local and Chinese trained) to consolidate their skills and invigorate their careers and it prompted me to reflect more substantially on learning, creativity and the body.

Antonin Artaud, rather famously, sought a language that is "somewhere in between gesture and thought" (Artaud 1977: 68). This is the room where meaning is experienced, hence known. Language approaches that meaning, and through language I sought to approach the experience of the bodies in the workshops. I did this sequentially, through draft after draft after draft, gradually becoming more immersed in that place, that space, those bodies.

I learned, that the process of making meaning from experience is a story that is told after the event. That story 'feeds back' and contributes to an ongoing process of meaning making. Inevitably, the manner in which the story is created has a lot to do with the way in which it feeds back, hence the way in which it influences subsequent experience. This, I approached through the metaphor of the refugee. A person who is constantly forced to look at a 'new' world of experience through old experience. Learning is found in the gaps, in the disquiet and the discomfort that requires reflection.

Formwork was constructed around problems in translation between different performance traditions. Through the workshop it became apparent that the languages of performance offer valuable opportunities for the negotiation of learning. Opportunities that are different, but no less valuable than those made available through written and verbal exchange. Recognition of the worth of languaging systems other than, or in addition to, the verbal and the written in one context suggests that they may be relevant in others. This is central to the learning contained in theatre and drama.

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